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By JANET CORNELIUS

“We Slipped and Learned to Read:” Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865

DESPITE THE DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES, thousands of slaves learned to read and write in the antebellum South. Few left traces of their accomplishments, but 272 ex-slaves who told how they learned to read and write during slavery provide insight into the literacy process within the slave community. For slaves, literacy was a two-edged sword: owners offered literacy to increase their control, but resourceful slaves seized the opportunity to expand their own powers. Slaves who learned to read and write gained privacy, leisure time, and mobility. A few wrote their own passes and escaped from slavery. Literate slaves also taught others and served as conduits for information within a slave communication network. Some were able to capitalize on their skills in literacy as a starting point for leadership careers after slavery ended.

Historians of education have drawn a distinction between “Bible literacy,” whose prime motive was the conservation of piety, and “liberating literacy,” which facilitates diversity and mobility.¹ The majority of owners who taught slaves were concerned with Bible literacy, and connected their instruction with Christian worship and catechization. The traditional nature of this teaching is shown by the number of slaveowners who gave slaves religion-associated instruction in reading but not in writing, a practice which recalled the early Protestant insistence that even the poor and powerless should be able to read the word of God for themselves, but that teaching them to write would threaten the social order.²

The religious context for learning was as important for slaves as it was for owners; most slaves who learned to read on their own initiative did so in a religious context, demonstrating that Christian teachings and oppor-

¹ Kenneth A. Lockridge attributes the initial rise of mass literacy in the Atlantic world to “intense Protestantism,” whose primary purpose was “pious conformity.” Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), pp. 98-100. Harvey Graff notes that the early 19th century American public school movement fostered traditional Protestant morality; its architects were clergymen, its publicists were the religious press, and its major goals included the inculcation of morality. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City* (New York, 1979), pp. 28, 314-15. For a definition of the “liberating” aspects of literacy, see Graff, p. 20 and Lawrence A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education* (New York, 1977), pp. 32-5.

² For the teaching of reading but not writing in religious education in 17th century Sweden, see Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick, “The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (August 1977): 374. For a similar practice in late 18th and early 19th century England, see Michael Sanderson, “Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England,” *Past & Present* 56 (August 1972): 81; John McLeish, *Evangelical Religion and Popular Education: A Modern Interpretation* (London, 1969), p. 95; Philip McCann, “Popular Education, Socialization, and Social Control: Spitalfields, 1812-1824,” and Simon Frith, “Socialization and Rational Schooling: Elementary Education in Leeds before 1870,” both in *Popular Education and Socialization in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Philip McCann (London 1977), pp. 11-12, 81-2.

tunities could have liberating as well as conservative results. Reading the Bible for oneself enabled a slave to undercut a master's attempt to restrict Christian teaching to carefully selected Biblical passages. Knowing how to read gave slaves opportunities to assume religious leadership within the slave community, where reading and preaching were closely associated.³

The present study compiles and measures evidence from former slaves on specific aspects of the literacy process: which slaves learned to read and write, what levels of literacy they attained, who taught them, the context in which this teaching and learning took place, and why slaves were taught or taught themselves. Two sources for evidence by former slaves who learned to read and write were used to examine literacy in the slave community. Most evidence was taken from the slave narratives gathered by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration, as edited by George Rawick and published under the title *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, in its original 19 volumes and the 12-volume Supplement 1, and in the Virginia interviews published separately as *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*.⁴ A reading and analysis of all the 3,428 responses by ex-slaves questioned by the Federal Writers Project interviewers as compiled in these volumes pinpointed just over 5 percent (179) who mentioned having learned to read and write as slaves.⁵ In addition to the evidence from the Writers Project interviews, 93 ex-slave accounts were taken from a variety of other sources, including autobiographies and narratives by former slaves; interviews with former slaves by nineteenth century black writers; life histories told by ex-slaves who had fled to Canada or were seeking help on the Underground Railroad; and cyclopedias compiled by black editors listing prominent black Americans, for which they submitted their own autobiographies.⁶ Only two of these narratives and autobi-

³ Northern observers during and immediately after the war noted that the former slaves considered learning to read almost a religious act. One Northerner on the Sea Islands described black children reciting the alphabet over a grave at a funeral in ritualistic style, and numerous missionaries commented upon the freed slaves' great desire to read the Bible. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, 1977), p. 156; *The American Missionary* (Magazine), V:11, p. 257.

⁴ Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976); George L. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, Conn., 1972); Supplement, Series 1, 12 vols. (Westport, Conn., 1977). Supplement cited in notes is Series 1; Series 2 (Westport, Conn., 1979) is used for text correction only and is thus cited in notes.

⁵ For purposes of tabulating slaves who learned to read and write, I have read all the narratives and used those accounts of former slaves who told of learning or being taught their "letters," or to "read" or to "read and write." Only those former slaves who were personally taught, or whose close relative such as a mother or father or a specific acquaintance were taught were tabulated; accounts of slaves who reminisced that "all the slaves were taught to read and write" were not included in the tabulations of the 272 slaves in this study.

⁶ Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage or, Charlotte and Other Slaves* (New York, 1890; reprint ed., 1972); Sam Aleckson, *Before the War, and After the Union: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1929); Aunt Sally; or, *The Cross the Way of Freedom* (Cincinnati, 1858); John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, 1977); Charles Octavius Boothe, *The Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama: Their Leaders and Their Work* (Birmingham, 1895); Levi Branham, *My Life and Travels* (Dalton, Georgia, 1929); Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, Ohio, 1926); Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man. Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man* (York, Pa., 1895; reprint ed., 1969); Edward R. Carter, *Biographical Sketches of our Pulpit* (Atlanta, 1888; reprint ed., 1968); Daniel W. Culp, ed., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* (Naperville, IL, 1902; reprint ed., 1969); Noah Davis, *A Narra-*

ographies, taken largely from ex-slaves in the public sphere, were written by women. However, the Federal Writers Project interviewees who learned to read and write included 67 women out of the 179 blacks interviewed for the Project who mentioned acquiring skills in literacy while they were slaves.

These two kinds of sources encompassed a broad time frame and extensive regional coverage. Since the Federal Writers Project interviews took place more than seventy years after the end of slavery, the majority of ex-slaves who talked about their experiences were small children during slavery. This was less true for the other slaves in the study. Most of the Writers Project former slaves learned to read after 1855, while two-thirds of the other ex-slaves learned to read before that date. The two kinds of ex-slave sources also represent literate slaves in different regions of the South. The Writers Project was weighted towards the Old South and the New South frontier states. The Border South states are more strongly represented in the other ex-slave sources. The Old South is most heavily represented overall.

Accounts by former slaves used in this study illustrate the reasons why the extent of literacy among slaves is almost impossible to measure. According to these accounts, neither slaves nor those slaveowners and other whites who taught them could proclaim their activities safely. Patrols, mobs, and social ostracism faced owners who taught their slaves. One former slave even recalled whispered rumors that her master had been poisoned because he taught his slaves to read and write and allowed them to save enough money to buy land at the end of the Civil War.⁷

tive of the *Life of Rev. Noah Davis, a Colored Man, Written by Himself, at the Age of 54* (Baltimore, 1859); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1845); Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves* (Boston, 1856); Orville Elder and Samuel Hall, *The Life of Samuel Hall, Washington, Iowa: A Slave for Forty-Seven Years* (Washington, Ia., 1912); Elisha Green, *Life of the Rev. Elisha W. Green* (Maysville, Ky., 1888); Laura Haviland, *A Woman's Life-Work* (Chicago, 1887); Lucius Holsey, *Autobiography, Sermons, Addresses, and Essays* (Atlanta, 1898); Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave* (Milwaukee, 1897); Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, 7th ed. (Bournemouth, England, 1909); Thomas Jones, *The Experience of Thomas Jones, Who was a Slave for Forty-Three Years* (Boston, 1862); Isaac Lane, *The Autobiography of Bishop Isaac Lane* (Nashville, 1916); Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs* (Louisville, Ky., 1885; reprint ed. 1969); A. W. Pegues, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (Springfield, Ma., 1892); Gustavus D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston, 1873); Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life* (Boston, 1893); William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1887; reprint ed., 1968); William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872); Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (Boston, 1902; reprint ed., 1968); Alexander Wayman, *Cyclopedia of African Methodism* (Baltimore, 1882).

⁷ Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, Alabama, VI, pp. 212-14; Texas, V (3), p. 121. Contrary to popular belief, there were few specific laws against owners teaching their slaves. By the 1850s, the legal codes of only four Southern states — North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia — prohibited the teaching of individual slaves to read and write, and Virginia's law did not ban owners from teaching their own slaves. North Carolina, *Revised Statutes*, 1837, pp. 209, 578; 1854, pp. 218-19; George M. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1856), pp. 58-63; *Code of the State of Georgia* (Atlanta, 1861), pp. 1878-879; *Digest of the Laws of Georgia* (Philadelphia, 1831), pp. 316-17; *Code of Virginia*, 1849, pp. 747-48. Alabama had passed a law in 1832 prohibiting the teaching of slaves or free blacks, and it had appeared in the *Digest of the Laws of Alabama* in 1843, p. 543, but is not in the *Code of the State of Alabama*, 1852. Similarly, Louisiana's law fining or imprisoning "all persons who shall teach any slave" to read or write, passed in 1830, appeared in a digest of its laws published in 1841, but did not form part of its 1856 revised Black Code, though other provisions of the same act did (*Louisiana Digest of Laws*, 1841, pp. 521-22; *Louisiana Revised Statutes*, 1856, p. 54.) Mississippi revised its slave code in 1831 to prohibit blacks from exercising functions of ministers unless on the premises of a slaveowner with his permission, but did not ban teaching of slaves to read. (*Code of Mississippi*, 1798-1848, p. 534.) Other states, including Maryland and Missouri, banned public assemblages of blacks for religious or educational purposes, but did not penalize individuals teaching individual slaves or free blacks to read or write. (*Maryland Code*, 1860, p. 462; *Missouri Laws*, 1847, pp. 103-104; *Missouri Revised Statutes*, 1856). Moreover, slaveowners tended to disregard any laws which seemed to interfere with their management

Slaves themselves believed they faced terrible punishments if whites discovered they could read and write. A common punishment for slaves who had attained more skills, according to blacks who were slaves as children in South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Mississippi, was amputation, as described by Doc Daniel Dowdy, a slave in Madison County, Georgia: "The first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine-tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger." Another Georgia ex-slave carried the story horrifyingly further: "If they caught you trying to write they would cut your finger off and if they caught you again they would cut your head off."⁸ None of the 272 slaves in this study actually suffered any such punishments as they learned to read and write, but some had personal knowledge that such atrocities had occurred. Henry Nix's uncle stole a book and was trying to learn to read and write with it, so "Marse Jasper had the white doctor take off my Uncle's fo'finger right down to de 'fust jint" as a "sign fo de res uv 'em." Lizzie Williams told of "one woman named Nancy durin' de war what could read and 'rite. When her master, Oliver Perry, found dis out he made her pull off naked, whipped her and den slapped hot irons to her all over. Believe me dat nigger didn't want to read and 'rite no more." Joseph Booker's father, Albert, was charged with "spoiling the good niggers" by teaching them to read and was whipped to death when Joseph was three years old.⁹

Few such demonstrations were necessary to effectively stifle the desire to read among most slaves, and to establish a mythology about the dangers of reading and writing. That former slaves remembered the atrocity stories so well from their childhood suggests that they had been tempted to learn to read, and that their parents feared that they might take advantage of an opportunity to do so. It also might give rise to speculation that the children themselves did not know how many people in a single plantation community might actually possess reading and writing skills, since the knowledge of this possession led to so much danger. The recollection of Campbell Davis, thirteen years old when slavery ended, that "us git some book larnin' mongst ourselves, round de quarters, and have our own preacher," may therefore have been true within many slave communities without the knowledge of the children. As Sarah Fitzpatrick observed from her experiences as a house servant in Alabama, many slaves could read but "de ke' dat up deir sleeve, dey played dumb lack de couldn't read a bit till after surrender."¹⁰

Slaves who learned to read and write were a select group. Slaves who could read included a higher percentage of urban and house slaves than

of their own slaves, preferring to think of their plantations as kingdoms in themselves, where each planter "exercises in his own person, all the high functions of an unlimited monarch," to quote Whitemarsh Seabrook in his *Essay on the Management of Slaves* (Charleston, 1834), p. 15.

⁸ Rawick, ed., *Oklahoma and Mississippi*, VII, pp. 78-9; Georgia, XIII (4), p. 305.

⁹ Rawick, ed., Georgia, XIII (3), p. 144; Mississippi, Supplement, X (5), p. 2337; A. W. Pegues, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools*, pp. 62-3.

¹⁰ Rawick, ed., Texas, IV (1), p. 286; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, p. 643.

was true for the slave population as a whole. While the urban population of slaves in the southern United States in the immediate antebellum period is estimated at less than 4 percent,¹¹ at least 16.5 percent of the former slaves who could read and write described themselves as urban. House slaves were also highly represented among the slaves who learned to read: three-fourths of the former slaves who specified their tasks during slavery described domestic duties.¹² A mitigating factor might be taken into account in observing the high number of house slaves, though: the majority of slaves studied were young children when they began to acquire the skills of reading. Young children often did house duties before they reached an age when they worked in the fields:

(N=212) Slaves who read before age 12 150 (70.8 percent)
 Slaves who read at age 12 or over 62 (29.2 percent)

Nevertheless, the former slaves who learned to read and write had more opportunities for learning than other slaves. Their careers after slavery provide another indication of the exceptional nature of the former slaves who learned to read and write. A large number held leadership positions in the ministry, government, and education.

Almost one-third of the slaves learned to read but not to write. However, given the lack of tools and the special dangers involved in writing, it is noteworthy that the majority of former slaves did learn to write as well as to read.

Teachers of slaves were tabulated in two ways: those who were most responsible for initiating learning (only one person was counted per slave) and those who participated in teaching slaves (more than one could be mentioned by the same slave). When the initiators of learning are compiled, the two sources of former slave evidence vary greatly. Two-thirds of the Writers Project former slaves credited whites with providing the initiative and the means for their learning to read, while well over half the ex-slaves in the other sources gave themselves the credit for initiating and obtaining their learning. Some of this disparity is due to the ways in which evidence was gathered. Living in poverty and dependent for their basic needs on the good will of others, most of the Writers Project interviewees consisted of those ex-slaves most easily found by the predominantly white interviewers. Dependent ex-slaves, hoping that the interviewers could help them collect their old-age pensions, could have inflated the helping role played by the "kind" white master or mistress.

The slaves who wrote their own autobiographies and narratives, on the other hand, were the more perceptive and gifted members of the black

¹¹ Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago, 1976), p. 12. House slaves, or slaves engaged in domestic tasks such as cooks, housemaids, gardeners, stewards, and coachmen, are estimated by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman to have comprised 7.4 percent of male workers and about 20 percent of women workers. Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1974), 2: 37-43.

¹² Census interviewers in most countries ask respondents whether they can read or write; no tests or other ways to measure "functional literacy" have yet been agreed upon. See Harvey Graff, "Literacy Past and Present: Critical Approaches in the Literacy-Society Relationship," *Interchange* 9, No. 2 (1978), pp. 8-9. Resnick and Resnick, p. 371, note that expectations in literacy range from the ability to write one's name to "the ability to read a complex text with literary allusions and metaphoric expression and not only to interpret this text but to relate it sensibly to other texts."

community, as well as the relatively more fortunate, and had more control over the information they sought to give. Those former slaves who wrote narratives for a Northern antebellum audience had good reason to minimize any role by Southern whites in their achievements. Those who wrote autobiographies after slavery understandably may have remembered their own roles more sharply and precisely than the part played by others, including whites, who may have contributed to their learning.¹³ Fewer owner-taught slaves assumed leadership careers after slavery. "Stealing" their own learning and obtaining subsequent leadership positions suggests that certain talented slaves acted effectively upon their belief in the "liberating" quality of literacy.

Counting all who participated in teaching slaves to read or write, 203 whites taught or helped to teach the 272 ex-slaves. Highlighting the closed character of the plantation system, at least three-fourths of these whites were slaveowners, their children, or teachers they hired. Twice as many mistresses as masters taught. Teaching was an acceptable female function; some women inherited this task as part of household management. Charity Jones' mistress taught her to read and write, along with learning to card bats and spin, weave cloth, sew, and sweep. Close association in the house between white and black women sometimes included opportunities for reading. Jane Pyatt recalled that "when I was a slave, I worked in the house with my mistress, and I was able to learn lots from her... although it was against the law to teach a slave, my mistress taught me my alphabets." Betty Ivery's mistress taught her to read after the day's work was done, "long after dark."¹⁴

Former slaves mentioned children more than any other group of whites as their teachers. Most were the adolescent daughters and sons of slaveowners or the younger playmates of slaves. Slave children often learned while accompanying their white playmates to and from school, or during studying time at night. White children taught their slave playmates secretly or without conscious violation of law or custom. Sometimes white children were more tacitly or openly encouraged by white adults, who may have allowed their children to dare to do what they could not. Henry Bruce, for example, learned from the white boy he accompanied to and from school. When the boy's aunt found out and complained, Henry's owner seemed not to care about it and did nothing to stop it; in fact, he

¹³ While legitimate concerns are felt about the validity of both kinds of sources used in this study — each group is select rather than representative, and former slaves in each group were addressing a particular audience for particular purposes — the two kinds of sources present the researcher with a body of testimony about slave life which cannot be obtained elsewhere, and so have been used extensively in studies of slavery and the slave community. For discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of each kind of source and comparisons of their validity, see David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History*, 46 (August 1980): 381-404; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, pp. xxxii-lxii; William L. Van Deburg, *The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South* (Westport, Conn., 1979), pp. 77-94; Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), pp. 3-17; Thomas Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community* (New York, 1978), p. 26.

¹⁴ Rawick, ed., *Mississippi*, Suppl., VIII (3), pp. 1195-196; Perdue, ed., p. 234; Rawick, ed., *Oklahoma*, Suppl., XII, pp. 354-56.

corrected Henry's spelling. Solomon, the black overseer on a large plantation, took his little mistress Liza to school. She taught him to read, and "as she growed up she kept learning more and Solomon had married and Miss Liza would go down to his cabin every night and teach him [and his wife] some more." When his master caught Solomon with a Bible in his lap and found out Liza had taught him, he was pleased and amused and even had Solomon show off by reading the Bible to some of his friends. He was able to parade Solomon's accomplishment since he had not been personally responsible for it.¹⁵

White teachers hired by slaveowners also participated in the learning of the slaves. Louis Watkin's owner, for example, employed a white tutor who came on Sunday afternoons to his Tennessee plantation and taught slaves to read, write and figure. In Georgia, Neal Upson's master built a little one-room schoolhouse in the back yard of the main house, where a white teacher taught the slave children reading and writing. Harrison Beckett characterized his teacher on a large Texas plantation as a "broke-down white man," who taught "de chillen reading and writing, and manners and behaviour, too. . . . Slaves paid other whites in the cities to help them. Occasionally men or women came to the plantations on their own volition to teach slaves. Ellen Cragin remembered an old white man who used to come out to teach her father in rural Mississippi. The old man cautioned the slave family not to tell the other whites what he was doing: "If you do [tell], they will kill me."¹⁶

Former slaves mentioned themselves as their own teachers more often than they named other blacks. Typically, Elijah P. Marrs explained that "very early in life I took up the ideal that I wanted to learn to read and write. . . . I availed myself of every opportunity, daily I carried my book in my pocket, and every chance that offered would be learning my A,B,Cs." Many slaves credited their parents with a role in their learning. Determined mothers taught their children, sent them to schools when available, or paid others to teach them. Fathers also figured as teachers, even when they did not live with their families. Anderson Whitted's father, for example, lived fourteen miles away from him, but was allowed to use a horse to visit him and taught Anderson to read on his biweekly visits.¹⁷

Brothers and sisters also taught one another. The children in Henry Bruce's family shared the knowledge learned from their white playmates: "The older one would teach the younger, and while mother had no education at all, she used to make the younger study the lessons given by the older sister or brother, and in that way we all learned to read and some to write." Other family members served as teachers. Ann Stokes' cousin taught her the alphabet "in the middle ob a field unnerneath a 'simmon tree." Grandmothers, central family figures, were mentioned as teachers.

¹⁵ Henry Bruce, *The New Man*, pp. 25-6; Rawick, ed., *Oklahoma*, Suppl., XII, pp. 298-300.

¹⁶ Rawick, ed., *Indiana*, Suppl. 2, II (1), p. 224; *Arkansas*, VIII (2), p. 44.

¹⁷ Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History*, p. 11; *Aunt Sally*, pp. 74-5; Thomas Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, p. 5; William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark*, p. 235.

Maria Parham's grandmother, "Old Lady Patsy," took care of all the sick and also taught Maria to read. Henrietta Murray's grandmother taught a Sunday school class on her Choctaw County, Mississippi plantation and, according to Henrietta, "taught us all we knewed."¹⁸

Other blacks mentioned as teachers included those who shared their knowledge of reading and writing beyond their family group. These included a slave in Tennessee who would make figures and letters on a wooden pad to teach the slave boys how to read and write, and Solomon, free and "ginger cake color," who made his living carrying his slate and book from plantation to plantation in Georgia, teaching slaves "for little what they could slip him along." Teaching was hazardous for the health of the black teacher and also a terrific responsibility. Enoch Golden, known to the slaves as a "double-headed nigger" because he could read and write and "knowed so much," was said to have confessed on his deathbed that he "been the death o' many a nigger 'cause he taught so many to read and write."¹⁹

Slaves seldom identified specific reasons why whites taught them to read and write.²⁰ Only the religious context of much of the teaching by whites stands out clearly as a motivation. Often teaching was casual and depended upon the slave's proximity to the house or to white playmates or upon the whims of owners. Some slaves became the pets of the white family as tiny children and family members thought it "cute" to see them learning the alphabet and trying to read. "Bunny" Bond's owners dressed her up and let her go to school with the white children when she was five, then laughed when she fell asleep and wanted to go home. Robert McKinley's owner gave the little boy to his favorite daughter, Jane Alice, as a present; she was very fond of little Bob so she taught him to read and write.²¹

A few slaveowners obviously taught their slaves because they believed in the intrinsic value of education. Robert Laird's Mississippi owner had his slaves taught how to read and write simply because "he didn't want us not to know nothin." The owner of Robert Cheatham's mother in

¹⁸ Bruce, P. 45; Rawick, ed., Missouri, XI, p. 333; Mississippi, Suppl., IX (4), pp. 1674, 1610.

¹⁹ Levi Branham, *My Life and Travels*, p. 10; Rawick, ed., Arkansas, VIII (2), p. 20; Georgia, XIII (3), p. 212.

²⁰ Evidence for white motivations for teaching slaves has been limited in this study to accounts by former slaves. For white accounts of teaching slaves to read, see Moncure D. Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences of M. D. Conway*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1904; reprint ed. 1979), 1:5-7; Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore, 1888), pp. 79-80; Nehemiah Adams, *A South-Side View of Slavery* (Boston, 1854), pp. 56-7; Frederika Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, 2 vols. (New York, 1853), I: 499; Mary Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York, 1929), pp. 292-93. For connections between the Southern white mission to evangelize slaves and slaveowners who taught their slaves to read the Bible, see Janet Cornelius, "God's Schoolmasters: Southern Evangelists to the Slaves, 1830-1860" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, U. of Illinois, 1977), pp. 263-87; Milton Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism* (Metuchen, N.J., 1975); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York, 1978), pp. 209-318. Southern churchmen proclaimed that the literacy law was constantly being violated, and was practically a "dead letter," thereby encouraging owners to follow their own consciences. Petitions on Slavery, South Carolina State Archives, Columbia; *Biblical Recorder*, Nov. 9, 1844; James Henley Thornwell, *A Sermon Preached . . .* (Charleston, 1850), p. 47; Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (New York, 1845), p. 160; William E. Clebsch, ed., *Journals of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America* (Austin, Tex., 1962), pp. 10-12.

²¹ Rawick, ed., Arkansas, IX (3), p. 311; Arkansas, VIII (1), pp. 197-98; Indiana, VI, p. 131.

Kentucky tried to carry on a family tradition from Virginia, telling his slaves, "You colored boys and girls must learn to read and write, no matter what powers object . . . your parents and your grandparents were taught to read and write when they belonged to my forefathers and you young negroes have to learn as much."²²

Sometimes whites taught for pragmatic reasons. Washington Curry's father was a doctor, and Curry recalled that "there were so many folks that came to see the doctor and wanted to leave numbers and addresses that he had to have someone to 'tend to that and he taught my father to read and write so that he could do it." Adeline Willis' mistress taught her the letters on the newspapers and what they spelled so she could bring the papers the whites wanted. Simpson Campbell's "Marse Bill" taught some of his slaves reading and writing so he could use them "booking cotton in the field and such like."²³

Religion, however, was mentioned by former slaves more often than any other context in which teaching by whites took place. On the plantations and in cities, according to ex-slave accounts, owners built churches and schoolhouses and hired teachers or conducted worship and Sunday schools themselves, where they perpetuated the original function of the Sunday school as the inculcator of literacy as well as religion. Squire Dowd's mistress taught such a class on a North Carolina plantation; so did Mollie Mitchell's and Easter Jones' owners on plantations in Georgia. Near Birmingham, Alabama, Andrew Goodman's "Marse Bob" built his slaves a church, where a nearby slave, "a man of good learnin," preached to them on Sundays; then on Sunday afternoons, Marse Bob taught them how to read and write, telling his slaves "we ought to get all the learnin' we could."²⁴

These owners felt their slaves should be able to read the Bible, but many hoped to shield their slaves from the liberating aspects of literacy. One measure of the conservative nature of "Bible literacy" is the level of learning attained by ex-slaves under white religiously inspired teaching. Whites who taught slaves in a religious context taught reading only and not writing more frequently than other whites. Owners expressed sentiments about the virtue of reading but not of writing. Henry Bruce's owner was "glad his Negroes could read, especially the Bible, but he was opposed to their being taught writing," and Bruce did not learn to write until after slavery ended. Elijah Marrs' owner said that he wanted all the slave boys to learn how to read the Bible, but that it was against the laws of the state of Kentucky to write (though this was untrue). Marrs said, "we had to steal that portion of our education."²⁵

Slave-initiated learning took place in a different context than that of white-initiated learning; slaves depended more on opportunity and desire.

²² Rawick, ed., *Mississippi, Suppl.*, VIII (3), p. 1292; *Indiana, Suppl.*, V, p. 45.

²³ Rawick, ed., *Arkansas*, VIII (2), p. 84; *Georgia*, XIII (4), p. 163; *Texas, Suppl.* 2, III (2), p. 612.

²⁴ Rawick, ed., *North Carolina*, XIV (1), p. 268; *Georgia*, XIII (3), p. 134; *Georgia, Suppl.*, IV (2), p. 350; *Texas, Suppl.* 2, V (4), p. 1522.

²⁵ Bruce, pp. 25-6; Marrs, p. 15.

Therefore, urban slaves and household slaves were in particularly favorable positions to obtain their own learning. Many domestic workers were taught to read by whites, but more than a third of the household slaves taught themselves or tricked others into teaching them. Belle Caruthers' duties, for example, were to fan her mistress and to nurse the baby: "The baby had alphabet blocks to play with and I learned my letters while she learned hers." Moses Slaughter's mother, the housekeeper, would say to the owner's daughter, "Come here, Emily, Mamma will keep your place for you," and while little Emily read, "Mamma Emalina" followed each line until she too was a fluent reader and could teach her own children.²⁶

In the cities, alert apprentices like teenage Noah Davis, bound out to learn boot and shoe-making in Fredericksburg, made the most of their chances. Davis saw his employer write the names of his customers on the lining of the boots and shoes which he gave out to be made; Davis imitated him, and could soon write his name. Benjamin Holmes, apprentice tailor in Charleston, studied all the signs and all the names on the doors where he carried bundles and asked people to tell him a word or two at a time. By the time he was twelve, he found he could read newspapers. Frederick Douglass made friends with white boys he met in the Baltimore streets and converted those he could into teachers by exchanging bread from his house for lessons. He learned to write by watching ship's carpenters write their letters for shipping lumber, and by copying lessons secretly from the master's son's books when the family was out of the house.²⁷

Whether in urban or rural areas, slaves created innovative solutions to the problems of tools for reading and writing and finding the time and place to use them. Slaves "borrowed" books from their owners, or bought them with their treasured small savings if the purchase did not arouse suspicion.²⁸ They made their own writing materials and used planks to write on, or practiced writing in sand.²⁹ Slaves used weekends or Sundays to learn to read and write; many studied at night. Ex-slaves told Fisk University interviewers that they slipped old wooden planks into the house, and they would light them and sit down at night and read from the light of the fire. W. E. Northcross had been warned by his master that

²⁶ Perdue, ed., p. 187; Rawick, ed., *Indiana, Suppl.*, V, p. 48; *Mississippi*, VII (2), p. 365; *Indiana, Suppl.*, V, P. 197.

²⁷ Noah Davis, *Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis*, p. 17; Gustavus D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers*, pp. 57-8; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, pp. 58-9.

²⁸ Slaves named Webster's speller more often than any other book as the tool used for their initiation into reading. Distributed in millions of copies, its use was a tribute to the persistence of the nineteenth century student, since it was a small book with small print and few illustrations or other enticements to attract the beginning reader. While more secular than earlier spellers had been, the "blue back" still emphasized religious precepts and spiritual and moral virtues along with its syllabic exercises. Noah Webster, *The Elementary Spelling Book* (Cincinnati, 1843), esp. pp. 26, 29, 69.

²⁹ Rawick, ed., *Mississippi, Suppl.*, IX (4), pp. 1664-665; Thomas Jones, p. 15; Lucius H. Holsey, *Autobiography*, pp. 16-18; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, p. 131; Rawick, ed., *Arkansas*, X (6), p. 332; *Arkansas*, XI (7), p. 185; Drew, *The Refugee*, p. 97; Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, p. 45; Rawick, ed., *South Carolina*, II (2), p. 50.

if he were caught with a book he would be hung by the white men of his Alabama community, so Northcross carried some old boards into his house to make a light by which to read secretly. This was a hazardous undertaking, as he recalled: "I would shut the doors, put one end of a board into the fire, and proceed to study; but whenever I heard the dogs barking I would throw my book under the bed and peep and listen to see what was up. If no one was near I would crawl under the bed, get my book, come out, lie flat on my stomach, and proceed to study until the dogs would again disturb me." Former slaves were proud of conquering opposition to their learning. Jenny Proctor triumphantly told how her community of several hundred slaves under a particularly oppressive regime rose to the challenge of restrictions against books: "Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster's old blue back speller and we hides it 'til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch and studies dat spellin' book. We learn it too. . . ." ³⁰

Given the very real dangers involved in learning to read and write, what lay behind slaves' "insatiable craving for some knowledge of books," as Lucius Holsey put it? Some former slaves attributed their high valuation of reading and writing skills to their owners' resistance. Their desire to learn, along with their belief that such skills could greatly expand their world, was augmented by the fact that these skills were withheld. Henry Morehead's owners objected to his attending night school in Louisville, because school "would only teach him rascality." Morehead resented the use of that word, and his owners' resistance persuaded him to use his own money and time for school. Frederick Douglass claimed that he owed as much to the bitter opposition of his master, as to the kindly aid of his mistress, in learning to read: "I acknowledge the benefit of both." ³¹

Slaves were aware of the promise of literacy as a path to mobility and increased self-worth. Claims about literacy's intrinsic and practical value, espoused by educational reformers in England and the northern United States had an impact even in the South. An interesting interpretation of this message came from a poor white boy who assured the enslaved Thomas Jones that "a man who had learning would always find friends, and get along in the world without having to work hard, while those who had no learning would have no friends and be compelled to work very hard for a poor living all their days." Lucius Holsey, who was the son of his master and who identified in many ways with the white world, "felt that constitutionally he was created the equal of any person here on earth and that, given a chance, he could rise to the height of any man," and that books were the path to proving his worth as a human being. ³²

Former slaves who learned on their own initiative mentioned the religious context for their learning more than any other factor. Since

³⁰ Rawick, ed., Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, XVIII, p. 57; Alabama, VI, pp. 300-02; Texas, V (3), p. 213.

³¹ Holsey, p. 16; Drew, pp. 180-81; Douglass, p. 65.

³² Thomas Jones, p. 14; Holsey, pp. 16-18.

many of the former slaves who wrote their own narratives and autobiographies were ministers, many attributed their desire for learning to their religious aspirations. One-third of the Federal Writers Project interviewees whose learning was slave-initiated also specified a religious context for their learning to read and write.

To many slaves, the religious context for learning provided a chance for leadership; the ministry was the chief outlet for such ambition, and the literate preacher served as a leader of the black community both during and after slavery. Preachers recalled that they first wanted to learn to read after their conversion and their desire to preach. Peter Randolph's account of his conversion was typical: "After receiving this revelation from the Lord, I became impressed that I was called of God to preach to the other slaves . . . but then I could not read the Bible, and I thought I could never preach unless I learned to read the Bible. . . ." ³³ The ability to read and write also obtained other advantages for slaves, including privacy. Sarah Fitzpatrick pointed out that if a slave wanted to court a girl and could not write, his master had to write his love letter for him, so "anytime you writ a note white folks had to know whut it said." ³⁴

Slave narratives reinforce the connection between reading and preaching. Rhiner Gardner recalled that "if there chanced to be among the slaves a man of their own race who could read and write, he generally preached and would, at times and places unknown to the master, call his fellow slaves together and hold religious services with them." On many plantations, such as that near Beaufort, South Carolina, where Melvin Smith was enslaved, "the preacher was the onliest one that could read the Bible." Former slaves recalled their belief that "white people taught their niggers what Bible they wanted them to know" only, and saw the literate black preacher as their key to unlocking the Bible's power. The preacher's high status is exemplified by Byrd Day, whose fellow slaves valued his ability to read and write so highly that they bought him a Bible so he could read it to them, and they farmed his patch of ground for him so that he could spend his nights studying the Bible. ³⁵

The preacher and the religious authority often became teacher too. Slaves learned to read and write in Sunday schools operated by black preachers and teachers. When Frederick Douglass was hired out to a Maryland farm, he began a Sunday school and "devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read." At one time his class numbered over forty pupils of all ages. Austin Butler, Virginia Harris' preacher on a Louisiana plantation, tried to teach other slaves the alphabet during Sunday school, since "he was a man with learning." In

³³ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, pp. 10-11.

³⁴ John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20 (January 1935): 330; Rawick, ed., Georgia, XIII (3), p. 291; Arkansas, X (6), p. 190; Charles Octavius Boothe, *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, pp. 69-70.

³⁵ Douglass, p. 70; Rawick, ed., Mississippi, Suppl., VIII (3), p. 940; Oklahoma, VII, p. 308.

Tennessee, James Southall recalled that “all our cullud preachers could read de Bible,” and that they taught any slaves who wanted to learn.³⁶

Slaves who learned to read and write were exceptional people who used their skills in literacy in exceptional ways. Some gained mobility: in Mary Colbert’s Athens, Georgia slave community those slaves who could read and write were usually chosen to travel with their master, so that if anything happened to him they could write home. At least five of the former slaves in this study used their ability to write to escape from slavery, including James Fisher, who wrote passes which got him safely across the border from Tennessee.³⁷

Literate slaves also helped other slaves. Milla Granson, for example, learned to read and write in Kentucky, was moved to Natchez, and established a midnight school there, where she taught hundreds of fellow slaves to read. Slaves who could read were often furnished with newspapers stolen or purchased by other slaves, and former slaves recalled the roles played by literate slaves in the spread of the news of the war and the coming of freedom. In Georgia, for example, Minnie Davis’ mother stole newspapers during the war and kept the other slaves posted as to the war’s progress. Cora Gillam’s uncle was jailed until the Union soldiers came because he “had a newspaper with latest war news and gathered a crowd of fellow Mississippi slaves to read them when peace was coming.”³⁸

After slavery, many of the blacks who learned reading and writing skills as slaves used their learning in public leadership positions, including famous “men of mark” like Frederick Douglass and “women of mark” like Susie King Taylor; founders and presidents of black colleges such as Isaac Lane and Isaac Burgan; scholars and writers like W. S. Scarborough and N. W. Harlee; and businessmen like Edward Walker of Windsor, Ontario. Government office holders included Blanche K. Bruce, U. S. Senator from Mississippi, and Isaiah Montgomery, who with his family founded the black colony of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Forty-five of the former slaves became ministers either during or after slavery: they served congregations or traveled circuits, assumed bishoprics or other positions in church hierarchies, or became missionaries, like Thomas Johnson, evangelist to Africa and the British Isles. Literate slaves opened schools immediately after the war, including Sally Johnson, taught by her owners

³⁶ Rawick, ed., *Georgia*, XII (1), p. 220; Blassingame, pp. 234, 237. At least 55 of the 625 runaway slaves (8.8 percent) who sought assistance from William Still on the Underground Railroad in the 1850s knew how to read and write, as did 15.1 percent of the runaways to Canada questioned by Benjamin Drew in 1855. Since neither Still nor Drew was particularly interested in whether the fugitives they interviewed had learned to read or write during slavery, the proportion of literate slaves among these fugitives may have been much higher. William Still, *The Underground Rail Road*; Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee*, op. cit.

³⁷ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, p. 643.

³⁸ Laura Haviland, *A Woman’s Life-Work* (Chicago, 1887), pp. 300-01; Rawick, ed., *Georgia*, XII (1), p. 257; Arkansas, IX (3), pp. 28-9.

at the academy where she served as a nurse, and Celia Singleton, who taught her own school in Georgia two years after freedom.³⁹

Some of these community leaders were taught by whites, but the connection between slaves who seized learning for themselves and their subsequent public leadership careers suggests that the belief by slaves in the liberating aspects of literacy as a form of resistance was not unfounded.

TABLE 1
DECADE OF BIRTH OF EX-SLAVES BY SOURCE

Decade of Birth	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
1800-1830	11	6.1	41	44.1
1831-1840	39	21.8	19	20.4
1841-1850	66	36.9	16	17.2
1851-1859	63	35.2	17	18.3
Totals	179	100.0	93	100.0

TABLE 2
DECADE WHEN LEARNED TO READ BY SOURCE

Decade When Learned to Read	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
1820-1835	1	0.8	23	27.4
1836-1845	9	7.0	18	21.4
1846-1855	33	25.8	15	17.9
1856-1865	85	66.4	28	33.3
Totals	128	100.0	84	100.0

³⁹ Douglass, op. cit.; Taylor, op. cit.; Isaac Lane, *The Autobiography of Bishop Isaac Lane*; Simmons, *Men of Mark*, pp. 1087, 411-12; Daniel W. Culp, ed., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, p. 279; Bruce, op. cit.; Rawick, ed., *Mississippi*, Suppl., IX (4), pp. 1538-539; Thomas Johnson, pp. 50 ff.; Rawick, ed., *Fisk Interviews*, XVIII, p. 226; Georgia, XIII (3), p. 270.

TABLE 3
REGIONAL LOCATION OF SLAVES WHEN THEY LEARNED TO
READ, BY SOURCE

Region	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Border South (Ky., Tenn., Mo., Md., Del., D.C.)	27	15.1	33	35.5
Old South (Va., N.Car., S. Car., Ga.)	68	38.0	43	46.3
New South (Miss., La., Ark., Fla., Ala., Tex.)	84	45.0	14	15.1
Totals	179	100.0	90	100.0

TABLE 4
POST SLAVERY CAREERS OF EX-SLAVES BY SOURCE

Careers	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Leadership (Ministry, education, govt.)	27	15.1	64	68.8
Other (Skilled trades, domestic, farm or day labor)	21	11.7	3	3.2
Careers after slavery not specified	131	73.2	26	28.0
Totals	179	100.0	93	100.0

TABLE 5
LEVELS OF LITERACY ATTAINED WHILE SLAVES BY SOURCE

Level of Literacy	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Learned “letters” (knowledge of alphabet to some spelling)	30	16.8	5	5.4
Learned to read but not to write	40	22.3	34	36.6
Learned to read and write	94	52.5	45	48.3
Learned to read, write, cipher, some grammar	15	8.4	9	9.7
Totals	179	100.0	93	100.0

TABLE 6
OWNER VS. SLAVE INITIATED LEARNING, BY SOURCE

Initiators of Learning	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Owners	144	81.3	33	35.5
Slaves	33	18.7	60	64.5
Totals	177	100.0	93	100.0

TABLE 7
CONTEXTS FOR OWNER INITIATED TEACHING, BY EX-SLAVE SOURCE

Context	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Owner-initiated teaching in a religious context*	63	43.7	13	39.4
Owner initiated teaching in context other than religious	5	3.5	2	6.1
Owner-initiated teaching in unspecified context	76	52.8	18	54.5
Totals	144	100.0	33	100.0

*Criteria for religious context for owner initiated teaching:

1. Owner or agent taught slaves to read as part of religious instruction or Sunday school.
2. Owner or agent taught slaves to read the Bible.
3. Owner insisted on or encouraged religious worship as well as reading and writing by slaves in one or more of the following ways:
 - a. Provided church on premises
 - b. Encouraged slaves to hold their own services
 - c. Paid black or white preacher for them
 - d. Accompanied them to church in nearby town or city
 - e. Held daily worship service or Bible reading

TABLE 8
CONTEXTS FOR SLAVE INITIATED TEACHING BY EX-SLAVE SOURCE

Context	Federal Writers Project Interviewees		Other Ex-Slaves	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Slave initiated teaching in a religious context*	11	33.3	25	41.7
Slave initiated teaching in context other than religious	2	6.1	8	13.3
Slave initiated teaching in unspecified context	20	60.6	27	45.0
Totals	33	100.0	60	100.0

*Criteria for religious context for slave initiated teaching:

1. Slave was taught by slave preacher or teacher as part of religious instruction or Sunday school.
2. Slave stated that he/she decided to learn in order to read the Bible and/or preach the Gospel.